



STATE SENATOR
**JIM
MERRITT**

Indiana State Senate
200 West Washington Street
Indianapolis, Indiana 46204



2004 Post-Session Newsletter

visit my web site at www.in.gov/S31

Prst Std
U.S. Postage
PAID
Indianapolis, IN
Permit No. 7767

Bureau of Motor Vehicles

The 'Front Porch' of Indiana State Government

The Indiana Bureau of Motor Vehicles has certainly had a rough year, and it's only spring. This year, one BMV commissioner resigned and then the administration quickly hired a new commissioner to fill the void. In late February, six arrests were made in the Indianapolis area after a sting operation was ordered because of the widespread use of fraudulent documents. Report after report has been issued concerning BMV employees, including an investigation by the media that reported 10 percent of BMV workers in Marion County have a criminal history. An agency review was conducted by a former U.S. Marshal, whose findings simply stated that there are, indeed, major problems within the BMV. All of this comes after 27 individuals were arrested late last year because they possessed illegal licenses and identification cards. Considering these circumstances, it is safe

to assume that the BMV is in dire need of a complete overhaul.

In response to news coverage of a widespread fraud scandal, the governor hired a retired U.S. Marshal to spearhead the afore-

Visit the BMV online at:
www.in.gov/bmv

mentioned investigation of the agency's operations. While the report did conclude security at certain BMV branches was sub-par, it offered no long-term solutions to the agency's troubles. The report, which many legislators believe is incomplete, was presented to the public two months ahead of schedule. The report has faced criticism by

some who say that all it contains is a statement of the obvious condition of the BMV. In fact, the report has been called a "drive-by windshield assessment" because it does not address deep-rooted problems within the organization, nor does it pinpoint the source of its scandals.

After reviewing the disappointing report, I authored a resolution to create a legislative interim committee to explore these problems and to begin crafting viable solutions. I successfully spearheaded an effort to revamp BMV customer service operations several years ago and I filed the resolution to focus on bureau security problems, delayed technology improvements, and possible new ways to offer BMV services to Hoosier customers. While this commission is a positive step, the governor should have dealt with the issues at hand before declaring his investigation "complete."

The BMV serves as the 'front porch' of Indiana state government. Anyone who wants to learn to drive, acquire a driver license, own a car, or obtain official identification uses the agency. Because of this, the BMV must work with a high ethical standard to quickly and effectively serve the people of Indiana.



State Senator Jim Merritt

Serving District 31 — Marion County



Property Taxes Remain Priority

The Indiana General Assembly started the 2004 legislative session earlier than usual to address property tax issues. Ordinarily, the legislature convenes for one day on the third Tuesday in November, called Organization Day, in order to meet and do general 'housekeeping' business.

This session, legislators conducted committee meetings and held session in November and December to attempt to ease the property tax burden for homeowners, farmers, and employers hit with higher tax bills than expected.

Due to the court-ordered property tax reassessment, some problems have surfaced in a few counties around the state. During several weeks in the fall, members of the Senate Finance Committee met around the state to gather information and evaluate state policy on property taxes.

The result of the "mini-session," Senate Enrolled Act 1, includes many of the good ideas citizens offered to help address the problems.

One of the most important provisions of SEA 1 will limit future property tax increas-

What Senate Enrolled Act 1 Does:

- Allows counties to waive penalties assessed for late payment of property taxes
- Allows taxpayers to pay their property taxes in installments
- Extends the filing deadline for existing property tax deductions and exemptions
- Requires approval from elected officials of significant property tax increases by non-elected boards, such as libraries.
- Streamlines the property tax appeal process to make it easier for taxpayers
- Requires assessors to use most favorable assessment method for rental properties
- Repeals local governments' ability to raise and spend excess levies and requires any excess funds to be used to reduce future levies

es through strict controls on local government spending. In 2002, legislators tried to anticipate the effects of reassessment and passed a bill that shifted the tax burden to sales and gaming taxes in order to generate an additional \$1 billion in tax relief for property owners. Property taxes are very

— see [PROPERTY TAX](#), page 3

2004 Facts & Figures

The Second Regular Session of the 113th General Assembly began on Organization Day, November 18, 2003, and adjourned March 4, 2004.

This non-budget year is known as the "short" session.

Senate bills introduced: 503
Senate joint resolutions introduced: 10

Senate bills passed: 18
Senate joint resolutions passed: 0

House bills introduced: 459
House joint resolutions introduced: 7

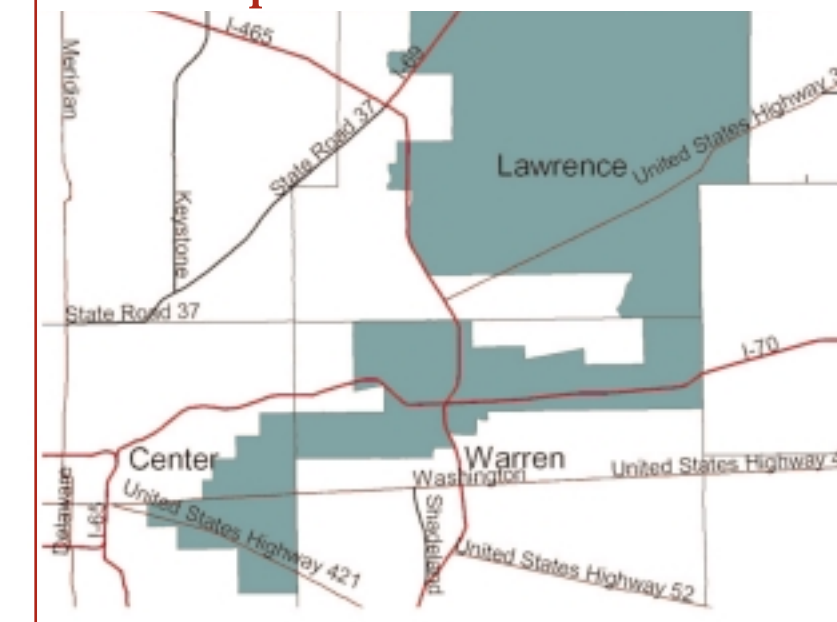
House bills passed: 80
House joint resolutions passed: 0

Percent of introduced bills that were sent to the governor: 10%

For more information about the General Assembly's 2004 session, visit us online at:
www.in.gov/legislative

visit my web site at:
www.in.gov/S31

A Map of Senate District 31





Senator Merritt and Senator Larry Borst of Greenwood greet U.S. Senator Richard Lugar during his recent visit to the Statehouse in Indianapolis. Lugar spoke to the 2004 legislative interns on his visit. Merritt serves as the Senate Intern Director.

Honoring Indiana's Finest

July 30, 2004, marks the anniversary of the worst U.S. Naval disaster in history. It was 59 years ago on July 30, 1945, that the U.S.S. Indianapolis was torpedoed by a Japanese submarine. The ship sank only 12 minutes later, taking 300 of the 1,196 lives aboard with it.

The U.S.S. Indianapolis was returning to the States from its assignment of delivering components for the world's second and third atomic bombs at the end of World War II. The remaining 896 men were left with very few lifeboats and struggled to survive in shark infested waters. Only 316 survivors were rescued three days later.

I believe we should keep the memory of the U.S.S. Indianapolis and her valiant crew alive. That is why I sponsored House Concurrent Resolution 32 to honor the lives of the survivors and to remember those brave soldiers who lost their lives.

HOUSE ENROLLED ACT 1265 — Establishes a program pooling state employees to negotiate lower prices for bulk purchases of prescription drugs. Applies to schools, state colleges and universities, and cities and towns. **PASSED. My vote: YES**

SENATE BILL 85 — Makes it illegal to have open alcoholic beverage containers in a motor vehicle, regardless of whether or not the driver has been drinking. This could have brought Indiana \$13.5 million in federal funds. **FAILED. My vote: YES**

HOUSE ENROLLED ACT 1082 — Requires a review of entries in the Missing Children Clearinghouse within 60 days after the review required by laws governing reports made to the National Crime Information Center (NCIC). **PASSED. My vote: YES**

Information Emergency? DIAL 2-1-1

We are living in an age where information is as close as a click of a mouse button. In the past few years, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of agencies and help centers available to answer problems we citizens may encounter. Despite this abundance of information, it is difficult to know where to turn for specific questions. With the introduction of a new and free telephone service, help is now a short phone call away.



2-1-1 is a new service that provides immediate access to every certified social service agency and non-profit organization in the state of Indiana. 2-1-1 offers resources for human needs, such as food banks, shelters and rent assistance. It also provides resources for employment assistance such as financial and education programs. It also offers information on health insurance programs, support groups, home health care, after school programs, protective services, and volunteer opportunities.

Currently, 21 counties are using 2-1-1, and a new law establishes the program throughout Indiana. House Enrolled Act 1344 requests no state money, while creating an account for future funds. 2-1-1 is generally funded with money from the United Way and their partnership with Cinergy. The Cinergy Foundation, funded by Cinergy shareholders, has pledged over \$600,000 to help fund this program over the next three years.

PROPERTY TAX CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

complex compared to other ways government programs and services are financed and the debate continued when session reconvened in January. House Enrolled Act 1001 was enacted to clarify and update language in SEA 1.

Senators also recognized the need to restore the value of certain targeted property tax deductions to levels prior to the reassessment. SEA 296 updates existing deductions for the elderly, blind or dis-

abled, wartime service disabled, disabled veteran, surviving spouse of a WWI veteran, WWI veteran, residential property rehabilitation, historic property rehabilitation, and residentially distressed area property rehabilitation.

We want to be fair and do what's right for Hoosier homeowners, farmers and family businesses. There are no quick and easy solutions. The newly formed Property Tax Replacement Study Commission will study the elimination of property taxes over the summer and work toward solutions that reflect the concerns of all Indiana taxpayers.

HOUSE ENROLLED ACT 1194 — Opens state records regarding a child who died as a result of abuse, abandonment, or neglect. Requires extensive background checks on all members of a household for temporary and permanent placements. **PASSED. My vote: YES**

SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION 7 — Would have begun the process of amending the state constitution to define marriage as the union of one man and one woman. Because it failed in the House, the earliest the provision could appear on the ballot is 2008. **FAILED. My vote: YES**

SENATE ENROLLED ACT 86 — Allows a voter to check "address unchanged" box on poll list instead of writing entire address when signing in to vote. Would save voters time when polls are crowded. **PASSED. My vote: YES**

Fairness in Funding:



Let's Do Full-Day Kindergarten the Right Way.

During last year's budget session of the General Assembly, education was our number one priority. It was the only area in government that was given an increase during these difficult fiscal times. While surrounding states have cut education, we worked hard to provide our schools with a 3.3 percent increase in funding for Fiscal Year 2004 and a 2.9 percent increase in 2005. This additional funding has placed Indiana 10th in the country in per pupil spending, which is a commitment that I want to be able to keep.

The state has drained every reserve account to make ends meet and provide schools with the money needed to continue essential programs for this budget cycle. The numbers from the most recent revenue forecast show that the state is not recovering as quickly as hoped and that the state needs to be cautious about what we are spending in order to keep the promise we made to our schools.

After an early start to our 2004 session, which officially began in November, the governor suddenly decided that full-day kindergarten would be his top priority when he gave his State of the State address in January. His first proposal was to fund the partial tuition of 20,000 full-day kindergarten pupils this fall. Parents

were expected to pay for a portion of their child's extra hours at school. The governor proposed several shaky funding mechanisms to cover the remainder, including changing the state constitution to tap into an account reserved for schools' construction and renovation projects.

When the bill reached the Senate, the majority agreed that the state simply does not have enough money right now to pay for a statewide full-day kindergarten program.

We all agree that early learning is important, which is why we wanted to form a committee to work this summer to find sustainable funding for the initiative. Unfortunately, Democrats decided that if they couldn't get funding this year, they were not interested in studying the issue this summer. The bill died in conference committee on the last night of the session.

I believe in Indiana's children. I want them to have every opportunity to be successful. That is why it is so important to approach new government programs and spending with a critical eye. We must first fund our current obligations to public education before committing ourselves to spending even more taxpayer dollars.

Indiana is 10th in the nation for per-pupil education spending.

Education is the only area of government that received an increase in funding during hard economic times.